Anarchy Vs. Communalism: Bookchin, 'Lifestylism', Ideology & Greenwashing

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Blasted Lifestylists!

The father of communalism; Murray Bookchin, long identified as an anarchist but later in life penned scathing attacks against anarchists. He largely invented an imaginary schism between what he termed 'lifestylist' anarchists and socialists, denouncing 'lifestylists' as being beneath him.

Even though he eventually abandoned anarchism in favor of his communalist ideology, this elitist divide he created between 'lifestylism' and socialism continues to reverberate today, with some social-anarchists even going as far as to distance themselves from the individualist aspects of anarchy that largely defined the movement from the beginning. This manufactured divide has greatly assisted in fragmenting anarchists into two opposing factions and led to needless infighting and distraction.

He lobbed the accusation of 'lifestylism' against anarchists who live a life that, to them, embodies the spirit of anarchy but, in his view, do not work hard enough to achieve revolutionary social organization and the overthrow of capitalism. He also used it as an insult towards anarchists he saw as promoting what he termed "anti-rationalism".

In reality, Bookchin was creating a false dichotomy; something he did often in his writings so he could then promote his patented solutions to problems that were often non-existent... Individualist anarchists are perfectly capable of both living anarchically in the current moment, as well as organizing for a future beyond capitalism.

A lot of the most successful anarchist movements in the world today stem from individualist tendencies. These movements are then aided by the social-anarchist concept of 'prefiguration' to create movements within the current system that replicate the conditions that would exist in an anarchist society. This allows the people exposed to these movements to see that anarchy works, and become comfortable with the idea of a post-capitalist world. Food Not Bombs is a great example of this.

Bookchin on anarchism:

> [Anarchism] represents in its authentic form a highly individualistic outlook that fosters a radically unfettered lifestyle, often as a substitute for mass action—is far better suited to articulate a Proudhonian single-family peasant and craft world than a modern urban and industrial environment. I myself once used this political label, but further thought has obliged me to conclude that, its often-refreshing aphorisms and insights notwithstanding, it is simply not a social theory.

> Regrettably, the use of socialistic terms has often prevented anarchists from telling us or even understanding clearly what they are: individualists whose concepts of autonomy originate in a strong commitment to personal liberty rather than to social freedom, or socialists committed to a structured, institutionalized, and responsible form of social organization.

> In fact anarchism represents the most extreme formulation of liberalism's ideology of unfettered autonomy, culminating in a celebration of heroic acts of defiance of the state. Anarchism's mythos of self-regulation (auto nomos)—the radical assertion of the individual over or even against society and the personalistic absence of responsibility for the collective welfare—leads to a radical affirmation of the all-powerful will so central to Nietzsche's ideological peregrinations. Some self-professed anarchists

have even denounced mass social action as futile and alien to their private concerns and made a fetish of what the Spanish anarchists called grupismo, a small-group mode of action that is highly personal rather than social.

He penned this attack against anarchy late in his life while he was working to build communalism into his final legacy, perhaps hoping he would go down in history with Marx as the father of a powerful socialist ideology that could outlive him and impact the world for centuries. He even warned that if his communalist ideology was not adopted by the world at large, it would result in the destruction of everything.

Equating anarchism with liberalism, when he spent years of his life identifying as an anarchist is a rather shameless attempt at rewriting history in order to sell his new vanity project. It's a true shame that he ended his long history in radical politics on such a sour and self-defeating note.

Communalism: Murray's Prescribed Cure for Lifestylism

Bookchin's politics evolved greatly throughout his life, starting with Stalinism and then Trotskyism in his youth, before he found anarcho-communism. In the 1970s, disillusioned with the authoritarian nature of the Leninism that dominated the worldwide socialist scene, he stated that he felt closer to free-market libertarians; who unlike the totalitarian Marxist-Leninists, will readily defend the rights of the individual. Later, he developed a series of interrelated ideologies; anarchist social ecology, post-scarcity anarchism and libertarian municipalism. He increasingly spoke out against the innate individualism of the anarchist movement, and finally broke with anarchism completely to form communalism. He was a professor and taught students his political theories.

This is a description of communalism in his own words (while also managing to disparage both anarchism and Marxism in the same breath, in true Bookchin fashion):

> The choice of the term Communalism to encompass the philosophical, historical, political, and organizational components of a socialism for the twenty-first century has not been a flippant one. The word originated in the Paris Commune of 1871, when the armed people of the French capital raised barricades not only to defend the city council of Paris and its administrative substructures but also to create a nationwide confederation of cities and towns to replace the republican nation-state.

> Communalism as an ideology is not sullied by the individualism and the often explicit antirationalism of anarchism; nor does it carry the historical burden of Marxism's authoritarianism as embodied in Bolshevism. It does not focus on the factory as its principal social arena or on the industrial proletariat as its main historical agent; and it does not reduce the free community of the future to a fanciful medieval village. Its most important goal is clearly spelled out in a conventional dictionary definition: Communalism, according to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, is "a theory or system of government in which virtually autonomous local communities are loosely bound in a federation."

Communalism brings production and certain property under the control of municipal assemblies, who decide how property should be best distributed to meet the needs of the confederation.

While not being a state by the most common definition (since the political process is strictly localized), municipal assemblies could still be described as a form of hierarchical government. Communalism is a big step up over most other forms of government, attempting to curtail and decentralize the power structures we are governed by, but it's not anarchy.

Localized power structures are still very corruptible. They still create hierarchy. They can still grow out of control. Similarly to ancient Greece's democracy; communalism deliberately allows for majority rule (or democracy-by-the-majority). This limitation should instantly disqualify it as being a form of anarchy, as voter-hierarchies can easily be exploited by authoritarians to exclude minority groups from the political process, and thus deny them the right to self-determination. Any society that encourages the majority to force their will on a minority (thus creating a clear hierarchy) can't honestly be described as anarchist in nature. Bookchin reinforces this further:

> The anarcho-communist notion of a very loose 'federation of autonomous communes' is replaced with a confederation from which its components, functioning

in a democratic manner through citizens' assemblies, may withdraw only with the approval of the confederation as a whole.

So, according to Bookchin, a community which joins a confederation "may withdraw only with the approval of the confederation as a whole." This is probably the worst aspect of his majority-rule fetishization, as it locks entire communities into his system forever, whether those who didn't want the system like it or not. Any organization that forbids you from withdrawing from it is clearly at odds with libertarian ideals and the right to freedom of association, so it's really dishonest of him to talk about 'libertarian' municipalism when it's anything but:

> [Libertarian municipalism's goal is to] create in embryonic form the institutions that can give power to a people generally … In short, it is through the municipality that people can reconstitute themselves from isolated monads into an innovative body politic and create an existentially vital, indeed protoplasmic civil life that has continuity and institutional form as well as civic content. I refer here to the block organizations, neighborhood assemblies, town meetings, civic confederations, and public arenas for discourse that go beyond such episodic, single issue demonstrations and campaigns, valuable as they may be to redress social injustices.

Put into practice, I believe communalism can initially be a successful departure from the unwieldy nation-state monolith that plagues the world today and a reversion to the city-states that were once prevalent in ancient Greece at the dawn of civilization. Bookchin writes fondly of classical Athenian democracy, which he uses to glorify his romantic view of Western civilization.

But does simply returning to an earlier state of civilization go far enough? Will an effective micro-state not morph back into a super-state as it grows and faces both internal and external pressures? Decentralization is admirable, but is it enough to successfully safeguard us from statism? And are Athenian democracy and Western civilization even things we want to reproduce, when both allow for the brutal oppression of minorities, were both built on slavery, and institutionalized the denial of human rights to anyone that wasn't a member of the privileged class?

Bookchin's ideas for 'libertarian' majority-rule democracy are deeply flawed and really can't be described as being anything other than authoritarian:

> The minority must have patience and allow a majority decision to be put into practice... Municipal minorities [must] defer to the majority wishes of participating communities.

Any anarchist reading this should immediately be alarmed at the unjust hierarchical implications it presents. White people putting their priorities ahead of black people, men forcing their will on women, Christians excluding Muslims, polluters shutting down environmentalists, heterosexuals subjugating homosexuals... Whichever voting body has the highest numbers (or best propaganda) can effectively rule over the minority. It's almost as if Bookchin came full circle, returning to the Stalinism of his youth after his flirtation with individualism and anarchy.

While direct democracy is one of several decision-making mechanisms anarchists may utilize, communalism doesn't simply allow for direct democracy; it requires it. Enshrines it in law. In making his case for direct democracy, Bookchin asserts that the only other option anarchists

have at our disposal is consensus democracy. He then proceeds to brutally attack the consensus decision-making method, associating it with anarcho-primitivism (which he vocally loathes, even equating it to Nazism) and deems it 'authoritarian'. This allows him to offer an exact prescription to the 'problem' of multi-layered anarchist decision making in the form of his definitive, structured ideology and its rules.

Organizational structures such as those communalism revolves around should be treated as a means, not an end. Basing an entire social system around a specific structured mode of organization that was designed to be implemented under the conditions present in the 1990s is restrictive and shortsighted.

Anarchy allows for communities to be adaptable to the conditions present in the place and time where the community exists. Rigid ideological structures should always be avoided as they rapidly become outmoded. Historically, communities revolving around political ideologies tend to become dogmatic, and as a result fail to adapt as conditions prove unfavorable to the demands of the ideology.

For instance: Marxism requires that a highly advanced industrial economy be present before Marxist communism can be implemented. Most of the societies where Marxism was attempted lacked these conditions, and destructive policies were implemented in order to speed up industrialization (including mass-displacement of people); eventually leading to the collapse of the societies and ecological damage that will continue to be felt for millennia. As Marx had designed his economic model to function under specific conditions, Marxist leaders attempted to force their societies to fit a mold they simply didn't fit.

The unwillingness to sway from ideological dogma; however impractical the planned system proves in practice, has frequently led to disaster. So any political movement that has strict guidelines for how society should be structured and governed has big weaknesses right out of the gate. Anarchy requires flexibility, because all forms of social planning can lead to unexpected hierarchies popping up. The avoidance of hierarchies needs to be more important than sticking to a pre-written ideology if we are to pursue anarchy.

Dedicated ideologues often tarnish anarchy as being 'vague' and lacking in exact instruction. I'd argue this is exactly why anarchy succeeds and manages to be so ageless; reinventing itself with every new generation of revolutionaries. Prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution to life is impractical in an ever changing, multi-cultural world. Especially while we're experiencing unprecedented worldwide social and ecological collapses. The greatest strength of anarchy is its flexibility. Anarchists have long laughed in the face of those who would have us live by their rigid rules.

A Green Anarchist Perspective

Green anarchists like myself are often most critical of Bookchin's ideas because of his concept of 'post-scarcity'; which to anyone paying attention to the catastrophic mass extinction event we're in the midst of, is dangerously idealistic. Resources don't cease to be scarce when socialism is adopted; the reality is that resources are dwindling all over the planet after centuries of over-extraction; including by socialist states. Once those resources run out, there's no getting them back, so an ideology that envisions a 'post-scarcity' economy is intrinsically flawed.

Bookchin and other socialists imagine a society where regular people, rather than states, have the power to determine policy. And they imagine this society will somehow be spared the same destructive pitfalls of capitalist society. But there's no reason to assume that.

We have centuries of history showing us that people will not altruistically opt for policies that will put the ecosystem or minority groups (especially indigenous and immigrant groups) ahead of their immediate personal interests.

Just as people now vote for politicians that loudly promote disastrous environmental and social policies in order to safeguard their own privileges in society, history shows us they would continue to make damaging decisions if the system moved from representative democracy to direct democracy. To imagine that everyone in a society is capable of acting unselfishly and putting other people and other lifeforms ahead of their own families is foolhardy. They will use their voting power to protect their own immediate interests at the expense of everything else. That's how power works. It corrupts everything in its path absolutely, whether its wielded by a politician or a private citizen is irrelevant.

Bookchin saw technology as a mode of revolution, and promoted using technology in ecologically sustainable ways, but green anarchists are often critical of the technologies Bookchin envisioned. We see them as inherently isolating and hierarchical. A position Bookchin scoffs at.

One of the technologies he promoted was cybernation, which is essentially 'rule by machine'. Tasks are assigned, decisions made and resources distributed by computers; largely diminishing an individual's self-determination and leaving it up to software algorithms. Like all software solutions, cybernation could potentially be hijacked by malicious actors who could seize control of the system and give themselves untold power. Cybernation is also exposed to the personal biases of the programmers who write the software. The programmers effectively govern the governor.

Bookchin often wrote enthusiastically about the revolutionary potential he saw in such technologies:

> Bourgeois society, if it achieved nothing else, revolutionized the means of production on a scale unprecedented in history. This technological revolution, culminating in cybernation, has created the objective, quantitative basis for a world without class rule, exploitation, toil or material want. The means now exist for the development of the rounded man, the total man, freed of guilt and the workings of authoritarian modes of training, and given over to desire and the sensuous apprehension of the marvelous. It is now possible to conceive of man's future experience in terms of a coherent process in which the bifurcations of thought and activity, mind and sensuousness, discipline and spontaneity, individuality and community, man and nature, town and country, education and life, work and play are all resolved, harmonized, and organically wedded in a qualitatively new realm of freedom.

Advanced technologies can forever alter the way we live our lives, detach us from our ecosystems and train us to seek fleeting relief from technologies, even as those technologies forever

degrade and pollute the ecosystems we depend on to survive. It's easy to ignore the damage industry does to our ecosystems when we can use the technology it produces to escape from the reality of our situation... At least until the ecosystems become so degraded that they can no longer sustain our lives and we're forced to look up from our digital sanctuaries to gasp for air.

Bookchin's emphasis on the modern urban city in his theories will give pause to anyone who has studied the history of civilization and its disastrous effect on every ecosystem it comes into contact with. City life has always alienated us from the land and what it produces for us, creating the depressing situation where most urban dwellers raised in vast concrete deserts have little respect for the natural world or want of preserving it. When the repercussions of our actions towards the ecosystem are completely hidden from us, it's unlikely we'll change our behavior and act to preserve whatever ecological diversity the planet has left on the fringes of the grim industrial wastelands we call civilization.

A society structured around advanced technology can even create new elite classes of technologically advanced people and exploited underclasses whose lands are used to mine and manufacture the devices the technological class grow dependent on. It's easy to see how this cycle can lead to devastating hierarchies.

Bookchin claimed technology and agriculture can be made sustainable with new advances, but years after his death, technology has improved greatly, while the destruction to the planet caused by it has increased tenfold. The science is showing us that the damage industry has done to the world's ecosystems could very well lead to our own extinction in the near future.

Bookchin wrote:

> The development of giant factory complexes and the use of single or dual-energy sources are responsible for atmospheric pollution. Only by developing smaller industrial units and diversifying energy sources by the extensive use of clean power (solar, wind and water power) will it be possible to reduce industrial pollution. The means for this radical technological change are now at hand.

> Technologists have developed miniaturized substitutes for large-scale industrial operation—small versatile machines and sophisticated methods for converting solar, wind and water energy into power usable in industry and the home. These substitutes are often more productive and less wasteful than the large-scale facilities that exist today.

While it is true that 'green' fuels can be less destructive than 'dirty' fuels, they still remain incredibly destructive, and by no means can they be sourced from a single ecosystem as Bookchin imagines in his writings.

The machines Bookchin speaks of are built using a large assortment of materials that need to be sourced from different ecosystems all over the world. The processes to extract the materials are destructive, the processes to transport the materials to the manufacturing plants and distribution points are destructive, and the waste products created during manufacturing are destructive. There are currently no viable solutions for any of these problems, and every new technology introduced to the market has instead created yet more inequality, warfare and environmental destruction; especially for the Global South that is exploited by the West for its natural resources and cheap (or slave) labor.

Solar panels and wind turbines depend on dirty mining to acquire the minerals needed for their construction, and massive energy use (usually coal) during manufacturing. Mining the quartz that solar panels are made from causes the lung disease silicosis in the impoverished miners. Then, once the quartz is transported to the factories, the manufacturing process creates vats of toxic waste (silicon tetrachloride) that is disposed of in random fields near the factories in China, contaminating the soil and water, and making entire rural populations sick.

From "China's Communist-Capitalist Ecological Apocalypse" by Richard Smith, Real-World Economics Review no. 71:

> When exposed to humid air, silicon tetrachloride turns into acids and poisonous hydrogen chloride gas, which can make people dizzy and cause breathing difficulties. Ren Bingyan, a professor of material sciences at Hebei Industrial University, contacted by the Post, told the paper that "the land where you dump or bury it will be infertile. No grass or trees will grow in its place... It is... Poisonous, it is polluting. Human beings can never touch it." When the dumping began, crops wilted from the white dust, which sometimes rose in clouds several feet off the ground and spread over the fields as the liquid dried. Village farmers began to faint and became ill. And at night, villagers said "the factory's chimneys released a loud whoosh of acrid air that stung their eyes and made it hard to breath."

Solar panel, wind turbine and battery production fuels colonialism, slavery, war, hunger, fossil fuel burning and ecocide. Calling these energies "green" is really a bold-faced lie and just the latest example of industrialism giving itself a skip-deep makeover that will quickly fall apart when the evidence piles up too high for the media to ignore. By promoting these destructive industries, Bookchin aids their shameless greenwashing.

Bookchin:

> The absolute negation of the centralized economy is regional ecotechnology— a situation in which the instruments of production are molded to the resources of an ecosystem.

The idea that rapidly advancing technologies can be distributed equally among billions of people (which they would need to be if we care at all about preventing power-hierarchies and inequality from forming), or that all people would even want their lives to be governed by these technologies is naive at best, or a malicious falsehood aimed at selling books and "Institute for Social Ecology" certificates at worst.

Bookchin's insistence that industry is only destructive because of capitalism, and would instead be liberating under (decentralized) socialism has no basis in reality, as the technologies he romanticizes remain destructive to the environment and are hierarchy-forming regardless of the social system in place. They also require resources that simply cannot be sourced from a single locale. This fact alone greatly diminishes his theory.

Bookchin:

> The new declasses of the twentieth century are being created as a result of the bankruptcy of all social forms based on toil. They are the end products of the process of propertied society itself and of the social problems of material survival. In

the era when technological advances and cybernation have brought into question the exploitation of man by man, toil, and material want in any form whatever, the cry "Black is beautiful" or "Make love, not war" marks the transformation of the traditional demand for survival into a historically new demand for life.

Bookchin's plans for localized, ecologically-sound, self-supporting, automated micro-industries unfortunately remain a pipe dream; vaporware if you will. In the 21st century, as the Earth's ecosystems collapse all around us under the strain of industrial exploitation, as forests burn, lands flood and countless species of plants and animals go extinct forever, his vision of distributing industrial technology equally and freely to everyone on the planet becomes less and less relevant to our reality. These ideas aren't something to base a political movement for lasting social change on. Not on a planet being rapidly exterminated by industry.

Bookchin eventually broke with anarchism completely when he finalized the guidelines of his communalist ideology. Today a lot of his more practical ideas have been implemented by the celebrated Rojava community in western Kurdistan, which has had mixed results in achieving his vision.

His attacks on individualist anarchists (especially of the anti-civ flavor), have provided decades of fuel for collectivist anarchist ideologues to villainize and purge non-collectivists from our spaces. A lot of these people soon follow in Bookchin's footsteps and abandon anarchy altogether in favor of various structured ideologies including Marxism-Leninism, transhumanism and communalism.